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# THE LABEL OF THE CONSUMERS LEAGUE.

BY MR. JOHN GRAHAM BROOKS.



The trade union label gave the first hint of the Consumers' Label. This device of the labor organizations is purely of American origin. It appears first in 1874. It has spread to Canada, and, in the single instance of the hatters, has, I believe, gained some footing in England. The chief reason for its adoption in this country lies doubtless in the intenser and more embarrassing forms of competition under which our labor unions suffer. The constant pressure through immigration of a great multitude of half-skilled laborers representing lower standards of life, and at the same time introducing race antagonism has driven the American trade union to catch at every weapon for its defense. The label is one of these weapons. Its first appearance was in California during the "sand lot" agitation against the Chinese. In 1868 some eleven thousand Chinese landed on the Pacific coast. In 1872 a San Francisco firm of cigar makers took on a number of Chinese laborers. The number which came into direct competition with the work of any trade union was relatively slight, but, as with the product of prison labor, it was felt to be of great importance. Against the rat-shop, cooly-made cigars of California, the cigar makers first struck.

But how should a sympathizing public know which were rat-shop and cooly-made cigars, and which the product of "American labor with its superior standard?" To meet this practical difficulty a label was adopted, not the blue label in present use, but a white one, to show the buyer that he was patronizing white labor. It was thus against the competition of a low-class unorganized labor that this weapon of the label was first directed. Its appeal was to the smoker: "Buy no cigars except from the box marked with the trade union label. Thus you help to maintain the white standard as against the cooley standard of life." At the Chicago Convention of 1880 new stress was laid upon the fact that the unions were suffering, not only from Chinese labor, but from prison and tenement-house competition. The extraordinary success of the label among the cigar makers raised the question of its adoption with other unions in 1883 and 1884. The powerful organization of the hatters introduced it in 1885. In the ready-made clothing industry the label appears in 1886. From 1891 the label was taken up by printers, bakers, wood workers, harness makers, iron molders, broom makers, coopers, photographers, shoemakers, custom tailors, mattress makers, horse-shoers, brewers, egg inspectors, and barbers (who display their label in the window). Labels are found even upon coal carts, indicating that union men only are employed in distributing coal.

Among the cigar makers, hatters, and printers the label is an influence of very considerable importance. The label of the printers, for example (adopted November, 1891), is in use in more than 200 cities in the United States and Canada.

Laws protecting the cigar makers' label have been adopted in at least twenty-eight states and territories.

That it has become a force is proved conclusively by the constant attempts to counterfeit it. The cost for protecting the label against these counterfeits has risen as high as eight thousand dollars in a year.

Two years ago in the Bulletin of the Department of Labor (3:215), a writer made the following statement:

"In trades like that of the garment makers, a label that should be confidently known to stand for definite improvement in the life of the worker, would attract a powerful public sympathy. There are many indications at hand that a growing public interest will soon demand from some source—from manufacturers, storekeepers, voluntary associations like the Consumers' League, or from trade unions—a label that shall be an absolute guarantee that the goods upon which it is placed are not made in sweat shops. Every increased effort of the unions to have their label a sure symbol of higher standards of life and work among the wage earners is certain to command more cordial and more helpful recognition from the general purchaser."

From the beginning the hope was cordially entertained that the Consumers' League could adopt as its own the label of the trade union. Practical reasons which could not possibly be overcome, alone prevented this. Investigation showed early that almost nothing bearing the trade union label was in the least likely to be worn by the people who made up the Consumers' League. It was almost exclusively a woman's movement and the whole body of what is known as "white goods," large portions of which are made in sweat shops, had no trade union label upon them. To have demanded the trade union label on these goods would force the Consumers' League to insist that every manufacturer of these products should forthwith unionize his shops. This would have killed the movement at the start. If we had been buying cigars we could have taken that label; if we had been buying hats or doing printing, we could have called for those labels. Our

League has indeed conscientiously ordered its printing from union shops, but upon the wide variety of products, where our first steps had to be taken, there was no alternative but to have a label of our own. Yet for nothing have we striven harder than that our movement should not antagonize at a single point the earlier label. The first form of the Consumers' League began in New York city in 1890 and 1891, through the efforts of Mrs. Lowell and Mrs. Nathan. Its purpose was to correct certain obvious evils in the retail stores. They selected two stores in which the treatment of the employes seemed to them more than usually humane, and, setting forth the good points of those stores, they wrote to fourteen hundred store-keepers on Manhattan Island enquiring whether they wished to arrange the work in their stores in conformity with the better standard, and have their establishments included in a proposed 'white list.' Out of fourteen hundred only *two* responded favorably, and from this modest beginning has grown the present 'white list' of the Consumers' League of New York city embracing nearly forty leading stores.

The real evils of the sweating system are, however, not at the stores but where the goods are made. The aim of the National League, started last year, is to use the retail store merely as an agent through which the manufacturing processes can be reached. The National League deals, therefore, directly with the factory. This explains the necessity of our label. Such a device must be affixed at points to which the most definite tests can be applied. The label could not be given to the retail stores, as no man in it from the manager down knows where all his goods are made. This is possible at the factory. Through the agency of the local factory inspectors and the trained inspector of the Consumers'

League it can be easily determined where and under what conditions the clothing is made. These facts are first ascertained, and if our conditions are met, an opportunity is given for that manufacturer to use the label.<sup>1</sup> Our contract stipulates :

1. That all provisions of the State factory law are to be complied with ;

2. That the label is to be used only on goods manufactured by said manufacturer on said premises ;

3. That no child under the age of sixteen years shall be employed or permitted or suffered to work on such premises ;

4. That no person shall be employed, or suffered or permitted to work in said factory longer than ten hours in any one day or sixty hours in any one week ; or after nine o'clock at night, or before six o'clock in the morning, excepting only the night watchman ;

Also to allow the duly accredited representatives of said League to inspect said factory at any and all reasonable times, and to comply with all reasonable requests made by said League for improving conditions ; otherwise to discontinue the use of the label forthwith, and for failure to comply with this demand the manufacturer to pay as liquidated damages to said League the sum of one hundred dollars.

The following statement concerning the label has been sent out to a large number of manufacturers.

"The National Consumers' League, a federation of local leagues established in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, is organized for the purpose of promoting intelligent and effective co-operation among purchasers in demanding goods made under right conditions in preference to the sweatshop product.

The National Consumers' League grants the use of its label to manufacturers who furnish working con-

<sup>1</sup> The label was registered Nov. 17th, 1898, at the State House, in Boston. The registration consists in filing a certificate with the Secretary of State. This certificate contains a copy of the label and, also, a description of it in written words, also, the date at which the label was adopted by the League and our statement as to the purpose and constituent parts of the National League.

A different certificate is in our possession, sent from the Secretary of State of Massachusetts, setting forth the fact of the registration.

This method was adopted on the recommendation of our lawyer.

ditions in compliance with the requirements of its standard, and urges upon purchasers the advantages attaching to goods that carry its label.

The manufacturer derives advantage from the use of the Consumers' Label, through the patronage of an organized body of enlightened customers; and through wide and persistent advertising without expense to himself.

The purchasing public derives from the use of the Label the assurance that goods so endorsed have been found to be made in clean and wholesome factories, free from contagion and vermin, and under the best conditions known in the trade at the time."

Through the agency of the press, lectures, leaflet literature, by the help of women's clubs, college settlements, etc., pressure is then put upon the public to ask at the retail store for those goods that bear the Consumers' Label. If the demand is considerable enough and persistent enough, the manufacturer will find it for his economic advantage to make his product on his own premises. The retail store will find the same advantage in insisting that their buyers avoid the sweat shop product. The public never yet has had a chance to know where and how its garments were made. The label is an instrument to make such knowledge possible. The label is registered and a definite contract entered into between the League and the manufacturer desiring to use it. Several manufacturers have already adopted it and several retail stores in Boston and New York have already ordered labelled goods.

Two years of very hard work have been given to getting the label upon the market. The form of its registration was full of perplexities. The form of the contract between the manufacturer and the League was

even more difficult. Even now the practical use of the label, if there is considerable call for it, will excite antagonism from the large department stores which do a portion of their own manufacturing in admirable factories. "Why," they ask us, "should we not have the label upon those things which are made in our own model workshop?" The very formidable objection is that such product would be dumped in the store with tons of sweat shop goods. The League has no means at its disposal to distinguish between these two products when once they are thrown together. Without impeaching the good faith of manager or clerk, the most obvious practical difficulties in keeping the factory goods apart from the "sweated" goods would rob the label of its chief value. The one fatal weakness of the trade union label, in the garment trade, has been of this character—that it did not stand clearly enough for the thing it claimed to represent. Unless our label can offer absolute assurance that it does not appear on sweated garments, its value is gone. Thus, at the risk of slower success and occasional hostilities, it will prove, we believe, a wiser policy in the end to guard the label from this grave risk.

Manufacturers at the great centre of this garment business, in and about New York City, have proved to be extremely sensitive about having the public know their relations to the sweat shop. No factory inspector has a better record for fearless investigation than the secretary of the National League, Mrs. Florence Kelley. Yet she finds it impossible to get from the New York inspectors the actual lists of places to which the manufacturers send their garments to be made up.<sup>1</sup> There is

<sup>1</sup> The law required in 1893 that the manufacturer must keep a list of addresses to which garments are sent to be made up. [Chapter 173 of Laws of 1893, amending Chapter 409 of Laws of 1886.] This was



some influence here powerful enough to determine the action even of inspectors that are supposed to represent distinctively "labor interests." This suggests what we have clearly conceived from the start, that the law must eventually deal with the sweatshops. Meantime it is believed that the League can render effective service in creating the public opinion necessary to make such law and its enforcement possible.

All that is essential to the principle upon which the League rests, has already wide practical recognition. Not only have important bodies—governments, cities, London School Board—come to recognize the principle, but where the discussion has gone on long enough, as in England, we find the idea put to practice on a scale that constantly widens in its scope. It does not take the form of leagues in England, but works chiefly through the co-operative movement. The Women's Guild, with its 12,000 members, is constantly teaching the relation between right buying and right conditions of labor.

Professor Gide's active interest in co-operation in France is closely bound up with his hope of teaching and realizing the consumer's duty in this way. He says: "Our very object as co-operators is to make a way for the doing of our duty as consumers. We deplore the fact that the buyer now exercises his power clumsily, ignorantly or with cowardice. This initiative of the

amended later to be a *complete* list in *English*, and still later it was amended again to be furnished in a *correct* copy to the inspector on demand. [Chapter 181 of Laws of 1899.] The National Consumers' League has been trying to have these lists gathered by the New York inspectors and treated as public records. This is not yet done in any effective or systematic way in New York. (It has been admirably done in Massachusetts for years.) The Label cannot be registered as a trade mark at Washington. We have, also, a written opinion of the Attorney General of New York State to the effect that we cannot register the label in New York; but that it is protected under the common law.

consumer is a fact of the first importance (un fait du premier ordre) to which we have often called and shall continue to call the public attention." The fact that co-operation has hardly begun among us leaves no alternative but to organize public opinion through voluntary groups for the purpose of arousing attention to the new duties, and making it worth while for the stores to meet the demand with heartiness and sincerity.

The Canadian Prime Minister Laurier said in 1897: "I do not want to see that system of white slavery (sweating) prevail in Canada." "If we have a duty to perform it is that we should make an effort to stamp out that sweating system in our own country." "The Postmaster General has taken the initiative in that respect and with the sanction of the Government, he has decided that in every contract given by the Post Office Department there shall be a provision which shall make it impossible for that contract to be farmed out," etc. In the United States, public opinion is so little developed upon this point that vast quantities of army clothing are reported from investigators to have gone straight to sweat shops.

The question seems a fair one. Is it more cranky for voluntary associations to attempt the enforcement of such a principle than for governments or municipalities? Any generalized practical recognition of the consumers' duty must in its very nature take on voluntary as well as legal form. That the life of those who make our garments should be at least as tolerable as it is in the better type of factory is a very modest aim. It is believed, if the Label rigorously stand for this better working life, the increasing demand for the label at the retail store will assure such economic advantage to the improved standard as steadily to extend its influence.